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November 26, 1980

BURMA ARCHBISHOP VISITS CENTER

NEW YORK -- "After a long period of isolation and many hardships, the Church in Burma is emerging with renewed strength and is looking to the future with hope and confidence," said the Most Rev. Gregory Hla Gyaw, Archbishop of the Church of the Province of Burma in an interview with members of the World Mission staff at the Episcopal Church Center here in mid-November.

He reported that in the early sixties the socialist government, which was anti-foreign rather than anti-religious, nationalized church schools and requested missionaries either to stay in the country or leave and not return. Most Anglican missionaries left.

"Many people thought that we were not going to be able to stand on our feet," the Archbishop said, "but thank God, we have kept the faith and our membership has increased."

The Anglican Church in Burma became an autonomous province within the Anglican Communion in 1970. The United Society for the Propagation of the Gospel of England was responsible for sending the first missionaries there in the middle of the nineteenth century and for continued support throughout the years.

However, Christians in Burma have relied on local resources for ministry for many years. In addition to congregational development, the churches have been involved in providing medical care, education and social services for themselves rather than depending on external resources.

At present there are 40,000 Anglicans in the country, served by 105 young priests and many lay readers and catechists. The country, approximately the size of Texas, is divided into three dioceses and one missionary district.

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Archbishop Hla Gyaw said that there is no stigma attached to being a Christian today in Burma. He added that there is freedom to worship and to evangelize even though the country is overwhelmingly Buddhist. The Christian population accounts for little over 1 percent of the 32 million inhabitants.

Archbishop Hla Gyaw, 47, has advanced quickly in his ecclesiastical career. In 1959 he became a school teacher, although his goal at that time was to become a medical doctor. After five years in a lay Anglican order, he decided to study theology and entered the seminary at Rangoon. In 1970 he was ordained deacon and priest a year later. In 1973 he was elected Bishop of the Diocese of Pa'an. Just last year, he was elected Bishop of Rangoon and Archbishop of the Province. He comes from an established Anglican family. His father and grandfather were Anglican priests and his wife Joan is a school teacher. The couple has three young daughters.

The Burmese Church leader explained that for 16 years the government did not allow Church people to travel abroad or to receive international visitors, but that policy has been relaxed and he is now allowed to travel. In November Archbishop Hla Gyaw came to Toronto at the invitation of the Anglican Church of Canada. He later visited New York as a guest of Episcopal Church Presiding Bishop John M. Allin. He was presented with a check for \$31,000 granted to Burma by the 1980 United Thank Offering for the construction of a new parish hall at Holy Trinity Church, Rangoon.

During a homily at the Chapel of Christ the Lord at the Episcopal Church Center, the Archbishop thanked all who have contributed to the work of the Church in Burma. "We feel very much part of you in spite of the distance," he said. "We are one in the Lord and that is the important thing."

He requested the prayers of all people for the work of the Church in Burma as it faces old and new challenges. Among these challenges he mentioned are the vigorous Buddhist tradition, the demands of the socialist government on the citizens and the need for pastoral ministry among the Christian community, which is found largely among groups with strong revolutionary tendencies.

Archbishop Hla Gyaw is expected to return to the United States in April for the meeting of the primates of the Anglican Communion in Washington, D.C.

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NOTE: Enclosed photo (#80434) shows Presiding Bishop John M. Allin on the left and Archbishop Hla Gyaw on the right.

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